North American practice is here displayed. There are also long sentences of medical jargon that easily offend.

However, it is not really these characteristics of practice that make it hard to digest so much as the style. To write well requires knowledge, technique, practice and rigorous editing. The subtleties of our enormous English vocabulary constantly challenge us to reach for an authoritative definition and simultaneously offer the opportunity for near-infinite subtlety. Here, the text reads as though it has been dictated rather than written and has been spared the invigorating benefits of critical review by a meticulous editor.

This is a great pity because so much hard work has been done and the result appears unfinished. Atul Gawande, the author of *Complications: A surgeon's notes on an imperfect science*, produced a book about the misfortunes of North American practice that contains far less material but is compulsive reading and difficult to put down. Even he admitted how difficult it was to write well and how much he had been helped by tuition from the staff of *The New Yorker*, who made his prose vibrant and accessible. His book was of course much less of a technical manual and more a guide to the personal journey of a surgeon developing maturity and wisdom by the challenging and often distressing experience of his craft.

By contrast, these books do not expose the authors as individuals nor do they bring out any of the philosophical or emotional consequences of this litany of catastrophes. We need to learn about that too if we are to remain effective, vigilant, compassionate and sane. Surgeons will find much to engage them in these two volumes but I recommend frequent tasting rather than attempting to drain the bottle at one session.

Principles of Operative Surgery: Viva Practice for the MRCS (3rd edn)

S ASBURY, A MISHRA, KM MOKBEL

EXTENT P/H	232 p, paperback
PRICE/ISBN	£21.95 1857757173
PUBLISHER	Radcliffe (Oxford), 2006
REVIEWER	John Lowry
STAR RATING	****

This is the latest addition to the Master Pass series of texts designed to support candidates preparing for examinations and the third edition offering viva practice for the intercollegiate MRCS.

The authors are based in the departments of surgery at St George's Hospital in London and the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. They have carefully assembled and updated the material to include topics collected from candidates who have sat the MRCS during the last 3 years with others from examiners who have set questions. Indeed, they point out in the preface that a number are questions that have actually been used, while others are included as teaching points. In addition, they recommend that the book be used with the assistance of a colleague playing the role of an examiner to improve its effectiveness.

It opens with valuable tips for success in the viva, including a simple but practical framework for describing an operation from pre-operative preparation, in theatre and on to postoperative care. More than 60 surgical topics are covered in alphabetical order from, for example, acute limb ischaemia, appendicitis and ATLS through paediatric inguinal hernia, robot-assisted laparoscopic surgery and sutures and needles to vasectomy and wound healing. Each is completed in no more than four pages in a relatively simple, easy-to-read manner. Following this, there are short sections on controlled clinical trials, medical statistics and surgical audit with a helpful concluding list of guidance for further reading.

Presented in an economical format in paperback, this book should fit into a white coat pocket (for the sadly diminishing number who wear them these days) with the consequent potential of being a helpful *aide-memoire* to reinforce live clinical scenarios on the ward, in the accident and emergency department and in the operating theatre.

Although its stated aim is to assist MRCS candidates, it is also likely to prove helpful for those preparing for certifying examinations of the American Board of General Surgery, the fellowship of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons and Canadian Board examinations. In addition, those approaching undergraduate surgical finals will also find it helpful as will those needing to update their general surgical knowledge in preparation for postgraduate examinations in dental and oral surgery.